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ABSTRACT

The field of Indian Studies has been forced to bear unusual burdens in its effort to establish itself at the university. Many of the first Indian Studies programs were so involved in student relations that academic content was shoved into the background preventing Indian academics from following tenure track positions at the university level. Student discipline is difficult to maintain--as it is in any ethnic studies program. The mistaken expectation that Indian Studies will teach Indian culture creates problems with both Indian and non-Indian students. Indian staff are overloaded with administrative duties that require minority representatives; they are expected to provide diverse and far-reaching support for Indian students and to set an "example." Finally, and most seriously, a majority of Indians reaching college are not prepared for college work. In spite of all these problems, the potential of Indian Studies programs remains high, and steps should be taken to improve them. College entrance tests should be used to identify the large number of Indian students who need additional academic training before college. These students should not go directly to college but to a transitional program where they can gain necessary skills to succeed in college. (JHZ)

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Indian Studies—The Orphan of Academia

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Vine Deloria, Jr.

Few college administrators would admit it today, but not so long ago colleges and universities had a blank for "race" on their admission forms and required a photograph of the applicant so that they would not mistakenly admit a member of a racial minority to college. The few individuals who did survive this barrier and gain admission were patronized and found themselves not recognized as scholars who had achieved an education but described as a "credit to their race." Administrators seemed to think that allowing a Black or Indian to attend college was providing the exception that proved the rule that darker races were fit only for manual labor.

Against this background there is no question that the idea of Ethnic Studies, including American Indian Studies, were forbidden in academia in the most absolute terms. Minorities were believed to have little to contribute to human knowledge and the idea that they might have some history or culture worth knowing was regarded as the greatest insanity. Social scientists had early divided up racial minorities into convenient categories and various disciplines believed that they had proprietary rights to certain groups. Thus, all courses and publications on Indians were classified as anthropology, and sociologists laid claim to Blacks and Chicanos. Orientals were a separate category which often existed only because history of religion professors fancied themselves experts in Asian religions. No one ever believed that racial minorities might have their own point of view. Whatever was said about them was regarded as highly accurate scientific information because it had been compiled by white scholars and their status in academia, plus their sincerity, guaranteed the validity of the work.

"No one ever believed that racial minorities might have their own point of view."

Ethnic Studies hit the academic world with the full force of the civil rights movement. Discovering that they were gaining on many fronts rights and status which had traditionally been denied them, young Blacks began to sit in at the college president's office to demand that courses relevant to their background and needs be offered. The full citizenship status which the 1964 Civil Rights Act promised should be translated into programs in higher education, people argued, and with the momentum of activism pushing them, college administrators first began to hire minority guidance counselors to work with minority students and then sought people who could offer survey courses which attempted to describe the place which racial minorities occupied in American history and society. In general the first courses should be described as "cameo" appearances. They were traditional articulations of manifest destiny history sporadically punctuated by polite

Ethnic Studies programs became industries in themselves when federal and private foundation money became available.

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bows to Blacks, Chicanos, and Indians. Not satisfactory, but at least a nod in the proper direction.

Many programs fell victim to university funding problems as the initial surge of funds began to dry up.

The haste with which colleges adopted Ethnic Studies—in an effort to clear the provost's office of long hairs—meant that it was impossible to develop the field of Ethnic Studies in the same manner as other subjects of study. Instant history and culture had to be achieved if demands were to be met within the time frame set by the protestors. The most common practice was to survey every course which had any bearing at all on a minority group, cross list it as "Black Studies" or "Indian Studies" and insert it into the college catalog, a glowing paragraph about the traditional care and concern which the institution had always shown toward that particular group, with the availability of federal and foundation money, the number of Ethnic Studies programs proliferated beyond anyone's comprehension and became an industry in itself. Realizing that these programs were being funded by "soft" money, institutions designed staff and teaching positions so that few ethnics received tenure. When the new money was gone, the minority staff, which was always regarded as temporary in the provost's office, would be gone also.

Part of the demand of ethnic activists was that Ethnic Studies have some relevance for the minority communities. This idea sought to transcend the traditional gap between knowledge and its relevance which is characteristic of white society. When this idea was applied to ethnic communities, however, it significantly confused the staff of programs because they had been hired to perform traditional academic functions and yet their major constituency was found off campus in highly politicized situations. Urban minority communities often saw university staff as social workers without portfolio and involved them unnecessarily in the conflicts of the community without providing them any defensive shield against unwarranted criticism. It became relatively simple for university officials to rid themselves of effective minority staff by aggravating existing frictions between the Ethnic Studies programs and the local ethnic communities.

So many of the first Indian Studies programs were involved in student relations that academic content was shoved into the background preventing many Indian academics from following tenure track positions at the university level.

Indian Studies has been forced to bear unusual burdens in its effort to establish itself at the university level. Decades of sparse opportunities at the university level meant that there were few Indian academics who could qualify for tenure track positions at the university level. Therefore, many of the first Indians employed were given staff lectureships or guidance counseling positions and programs were initially involved in student relations with academic content being the last function of the program. Much of the federal money was designated for "education" and for Washington bureaucrats this label meant that Schools of Education would receive the majority of the funds. Over the years student enrollment has moved in parallel with the availability of federal funding so that programs have been consistently denied any possibility of developing academic content.

Indian staff members have continually been thrust into an untenable position by a number of forces which work unwittingly in concert to undermine program development. Some Indians see a college education as a kind of subsidy which enables them to escape working for a living. They move from program to program and college to college with amazing ease. Their talent appears to be that of looking sincere, swearing an undying interest in

the program, and securing a scholarship or fellowship from the sparse funds available to the program. They will enroll in classes, make a perfunctory effort to attend classes, and then drop most of their courses on the last day allowed, securing perhaps three credit hours each semester. They always have an excuse to cover their inability or refusal to complete their course work. When the Indian staff seeks to invoke some kind of discipline in an effort to develop their program, they are met with angry accusations by whites on campus who have been convinced by the students that the Indian staff is not sympathetic to students. Universities eager to keep their minority enrollments high almost always overrule the staff and take the side of the students, rendering the Indian program helpless in its effort to establish standards of work for its other students.

Discipline is difficult to maintain in any Ethnic Studies program.

The origins of Ethnic Studies leave some questions unresolved. Are these programs designed to teach the culture of the group as a direct mission, in effect substituting themselves in the role of elder of the community? Or are these groups designed to teach the history and results of the relationship of the group to the larger society? Too many people come to Indian Studies programs expecting to be taught the most profound secrets of tribal culture. They become bored and distracted when they discover that what is taught is the structure of the relationship of Indians to the larger society. This expectation has been generated by the fact that a good percentage of Indians attending college today did not grow up on the reservations and, therefore, have no first hand knowledge of their tribes. They expect the university to provide them with this information. University officials have never remotely considered their job to be the perpetuation of culture for racial minorities who have already experienced considerable acculturation.

"Too many people come to Indian Studies programs expecting to be taught the most profound secrets of tribal culture."

The expectation that Indian Studies will teach Indian culture produces another phenomenon which gives the programs a very bad image in the eyes of university administrators. Students know that they know little about their own culture. Therefore, they are very hesitant to take Indian Studies courses for fear they will have to reveal their lack of knowledge before the Indian professor and the white students enrolled in the class. As a result of this attitude, most Indian Studies courses do not draw Indian students but rather depend heavily upon white students for their attendance. Unfortunately Indian students cover up this fear by accusing the Indian instructor of teaching courses that are "not relevant," thereupon discrediting his efforts with the administration. But Indian Studies courses, because they are filled with non-Indians, have to be designed to reach the non-Indians, and thus do become not as relevant to Indians as they might be.

Many Indian students fear that they will reveal their lack of knowledge of Indian culture before the Indian professor and the white students.

Indian Studies programs also suffer from an overload of administrative responsibilities. Indian staff is routinely expected to fill a place on university committees so that there will be minority "representation." Most university committees are dominated by a few campus politicos. They already have the agenda established and some have the final committee report drafted before the committee begins its deliberations. It is demeaning enough for white professors to be subjected to these indignities; for Indian staff it is intolerable. The chances of any particular non-Indian professor being named to a university committee are about 100–1; for the minority professor they are 100 percent and it is a rare minority professor who can resist a call

from the president's office successfully.

Another burden, which Indian staff have had to bear, involves a complex relationship with students. Students expect the Indian professor to do almost everything for them, from telling them what courses to take to picking them up at airports in the middle of the night, to supporting whatever form of social life students may have. Non-Indian professors have office hours where they meet students and very little contact with students outside of these times and classroom hours. Indian professors are expected to be available all hours of the day and night for any purpose whatsoever. The time toward which Indian professors can devote themselves to establishing their academic careers is minimal and as a result they fall far behind non-Indians in the important category of publishing. Every university catalog will describe in glowing terms how the professors are expected to teach, publish, and engage in some form of community service in order to get tenure and promotion. This contention is pure poppycock. Publishing alone is the criterion for advancement; public service in most instances probably counts against the professor because it indicates that he is involved with the community and not in the archives grinding out a book.

"Publishing alone is the criterion for advancement."

The university also demands that Indian professors provide an "example" to Indian students. The thinking behind this requirement is that Indian students are unlike any other group in the world. They need to see, feel, and experience a live Indian professor or they will have no faith in the ability of the institution to provide them with an education. For some strange reason white students are thought to be immune from this handicap. When this belief is applied in the university setting, the Indian professor lives under a glass cover while the non-Indian professor is free to do whatever he wants. The Indian professor must set a standard of behavior that can be admired; the non-Indians can take pride in the fact that Indians are living up to academic standards which they need not acknowledge.

More Indian students are reaching college but the number who succeed has not significantly increased since 1960. Many of these students have no academic background.

Over the past two decades the federal government has spent a considerable amount of money for college scholarships for Indians. Private sources have also been generous. So the number of Indians in college has risen dramatically. An estimated 2,000 Indians were in college in 1960; approximately 30,000 are presently in some form of higher education. Unfortunately, the education which Indians have been receiving at the grade school and high school level has not significantly improved during these two decades and the world has become more complicated. The result has been that, while more Indians are reaching college, the number who succeed has not significantly increased from the 1960 level. The drop-out rate of Indians in college is astronomical. It is kept much lower than it actually is because of the inclusion of a large group of marginal Indians from the cities who have claimed a remote Indian ancestry in order to qualify for scholarship assistance. If one were to take the students who graduate from reservation schools and figure their rate of success in college the figures would be devastating.

The drop-out rate is explained by everything except its real causative factor—there is virtually no academic background upon which Indian students can draw when they reach college. A majority of Indians reaching college have no study skills, cannot read well enough to do college work,

and can barely write a legible sentence, let alone a paper of college quality. Unfortunately, much the same thing can now be said of non-Indians so the possibility of the Indian student learning study skills from his dealings with whites is non-existent. Nevertheless, many educators attempting to explain this drop-out rate place blame on every other conceivable factor, except inadequate preparation. And to counteract the reality of the situation—that students cannot read and write—Indian staff must take up their time operating all kinds of remedial programs or else must lower their expectations of students to a minimal level thereby erasing any academic standards they might have wanted to establish.

Many educators blame the drop out rate on everything but inadequate preparation.

There are undoubtedly more comments and reflections that might be made about Ethnic and Indian Studies programs. What is the solution, if any, to some of these problems and how do we go about correcting them: Is it even worth our while to try to save Indian Studies programs at any level or institution?

Although the national picture is gloomy, and the local level, when we take off the aspirations and rose-colored glasses and give the situation and honest appraisal, even worse, nevertheless there remains a great deal of substance in the Indian Studies concept. The future potential of these programs remains high. One should expect the general confusion about Indian education, which has been a constant problem for most of this century, to manifest itself most clearly at the level of higher education where the products of primary and secondary schooling must eventually be tested. Indeed, introducing some corrective measures, no matter how radical, may help to introduce other reforms at the lower levels of education and dramatically improve the educational future of Indians.

At one time only adequately prepared Indians who really wanted an education went to college. They took out loans, worked, studied like hell, and were able to overcome all kinds of discrimination barriers. It is a sad commentary on the state of the national Indian community that today, with many of these discriminatory barriers gone, we are not producing as many good scholars and college graduates as we did a quarter of a century ago. While college should be one of the natural options available to Indians upon graduation from high school, we should stop pressuring every Indian student to rush to college. We are destroying many young people who have neither the preparation nor the inclination to attend college but who feel that if they did not a least attend for a year or two they would be failures.

Today, many young Indians feel that they must attend at least one year of college, academic background or not.

A good deal more attention should be paid to college entrance tests. Granted that they are culturally biased. American society is culturally biased and that is the society in which Indians must live and earn a living. We should give these tests more credence because they can give us a reasonable prediction about how difficult college will be for our students. Analysis of these tests will show that a large number of Indian students need additional training in reading and writing English. These students should not go directly to college but should be placed in a transitional program where they can gain the necessary skills to succeed in college. One of the present Indian boarding schools, perhaps even Haskell, should be used to provide a transitional year between regular college and high school for most Indian students. During this year they can use many of the Indian Studies courses

Many students need extra training before they have the necessary skills to succeed in college.

that have been developed which deal specifically with Indian culture. We, therefore, solve a number of existing problems.

Indian Studies programs must define their goals to encompass the relationship of American Indians to the rest of the world.

First, Indian students will enter college in considerably better academic shape to enable them to succeed. Second, they will have studied Indian history and culture for a year and be relatively well grounded in their own traditions so that they will not have to deal with cultural identity problems at the same time that they are adjusting to the large college or university setting. Incoming students will become an asset to existing Indian Studies programs, instead of a liability. A good many of the remedial programs which Indian Studies are forced to operate will be eliminated so that the staff can concentrate on development of the academic content of their programs. Incoming Indian students will form an Indian community on campus and release the university Indian staff from the necessity of spending so much time cultivating the local Indian community whose interests are often quite different from those of the university people.

College and graduate scholarships and fellowships should be awarded on the basis of need and academic potential. At the present time they can be highly politicized as are Title IV's and graduate fellowships, or so highly restricted as are some of the private fellowships, that students choose their majors in direct proportion to where funds are available, not to their interests and goals. The scholarships and fellowships should provide sufficient funds to allow a student to enter school and finish and they should be administered with more efficiency so that students do not have to wait for months to get their funds. Students should be expected to maintain a much higher minimum standard of academic performance so that we eliminate the professional student who sees college as an alternative funding source to unemployment compensation.

Indian Studies programs should then define their goals as encompassing all the relevant knowledge and information concerning the relationship between American Indians and the rest of the world, be it the federal government, other religions, the world of art and music, or international and domestic economics. With clearly defined goals Indian Studies staff can turn their attention to developing the substance of Indian Studies and not be hamstrung by the procedures for maintaining a program within the university setting. In this format both students and professors would understand the expectations placed upon them by both the university and the Indian communities, and they would be able to respond, within the limits of their defined mission, to both.

College degrees must represent achievement, not a coincidental intersection between a person with a pulse and a classroom.

The program as outlined above seems unduly elitist and, of course, it is. College degrees are not issued as a matter of course to anyone who bops in off the street and acts sincere. They must represent some measured form of achievement not merely the coincidental intersection between a person with a pulse and a classroom. Indian higher education, like the higher education of other groups, particularly the white majority, must have a continuum in which students with varying degrees of skill and accomplishment can be measured. The efforts of the last two decades to manufacture a generation of Indian college graduates have simply submerged the better students in a mass problem without producing any significant results. It would be far better to produce a handful of really capable people, bright capable people,

than continue to push hundreds of barely educated Indian students out the doors of the university.

Indian Studies programs may well continue to limp along trying to perform several confusing and conflicting missions. If the present situation continues there is no question that another decade will pass before we begin to clarify what Indian Studies means. So the best effort that we can make is to become actively involved in identifying the problems we face and the tasks we are asked to perform by both the Indian community and the university and then become active in changing Indian educational policies and programs so that we can clearly delineate our role and enable our programs to make their best contribution. In my opinion that contribution is to demonstrate the substance of Indian traditions and culture by developing a professional stance that enables Indian students to succeed in the higher educational setting.

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